

Introduction

By Temple Hauptfleisch

Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies

University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

Preamble

It is by a strange and somewhat serendipitous twist of fate that I have ended up writing an introduction to this new work on perhaps one of the most influential theatrical figures of all time. I happened to be spending a term teaching in the Drama Department at York University, Toronto in 2006 and so was invited to attend and participate in the first Canadian gathering of international scholars entirely devoted to the work and influence of Constantin Stanislavsky.¹ Originally invited to discuss the South African experience of the Stanislavsky approach, I was unfortunately unable to access the necessary materials to undertake the research for the paper at such short notice and from such a distance, so I ended up merely being an observer to the grand show put on by the specialists and their students and protégés. It all turned out to be a most delightful experience and the kind invitation to do the summing up of the conference gave me a rather specific interest in and particular slant on my experience of the event as a whole, something I hope to share with you in this essay.

In view of the foregoing, it will come as no surprise that this introduction is largely based on some of the almost impromptu thoughts I had expressed during my closing remarks at the end of the conference – along with a few more ideas that have come to me since. But then, of course, I have always believed that the best introductions are usually written after the fact, a response “recollected in tranquillity” and (sometimes) with the benefit of hindsight.

The conference itself was a model of its kind: small, focussed and displaying a strong integration of theory and practice in its choice of speakers and of formats for the discussions. (This is so important in anything to do with theatre.) The mere presence of such diverse yet well known practitioner-theorists as Charles Marowitz, Gene Lasko and Marrie Mumford, alongside the more formal and formidable papers by a range of academic scholars and postgraduate students, turned the entire event into an entertaining yet thought-provoking show. The fact is, the performances of the guest speakers seemed to inspire many of the other speakers also to come out of their shells and strut their stuff. We were, after all, sitting in a working theatre! The result was that not only did the

programme allow everyone to hear each speaker, but the responses were warm and interactive, inevitably leading on to lively discussions during the breaks. And all these essential qualities have somehow been retained and enhanced in this book by the choice of articles and interviews, and the varied ways in which they have been presented.

The gospel according to Stan

A key component of any conversation on Stanislavsky (and in the training of actors or directors for that matter) is the fundamental hermeneutic exercise of analysing and understanding the core texts and the accompanying practice by Stanislavsky and his colleagues and successors. Many of the chapters in this book (e.g. those by Annelis Kuhlmann, Brian Smith, Garrett Eisler; K. Jane Gibson; Gene Lasko, Leslie O'Dell and Richard Walsh Bowers, Jana Meerzon and Jill Carter) also fall into this category, being exegetic studies devoted to exploring once more the intention behind, meaning of, and uses for the various ideas, concepts and beliefs that make up the "Stanislavskian way". What does this tell us about the status of the body of work and man who created it?

In every field of human endeavour we have our superheroes, a handful of unique individuals who are touchstones of excellence and the source of our inspiration. In the natural sciences, for example, the names of Archimedes, Galileo, Newton, Darwin and Einstein are names to conjure with, their very names representative of ideas that have changed our view of the world. The texts they produced have become the holy writ of science, fundamental works to be studied, analysed and revisited time and again, the lode stars for all further travels on that intellectual highway or byway. And the same is true of the social sciences, humanities and the arts as well.

In the world of theatre and performance we have our own divinities, iconic figures whose works have transcended time and space, and who have managed, somehow, to grasp and communicate something of the complexity and compulsion of the theatrical event to the world at large. It is to them we keep returning whenever we engage in academic/artistic creation in theatre and theatre studies. First among these icons has long been and will no doubt long remain Aristotle.² And to many – myself included – the next in order of influence and impact is our friend Constantin Sergeyevich (or simply "Stan" as my students tend to refer to him). There are obviously many more, among them the many intriguing exponents of theory-in-practice (exemplified by writers/practitioners such as Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Beckett, and so many others), or the multitude of 20th century rebels against the ideas of Aristotle and/or Stanislavski (including such luminaries and visionaries as Meyerhold,

Strassberg, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowsky, Boal, Michael Chekhov, etc.) But at the core of these debates lie two sets of ideas – what one could perhaps refer to as an old and a new testament of theatre practice. The first focuses on the *nature of the event* and the second on the *processes of achieving that event*. All the other writings and projects that have followed appear to exist in relief to these vast and iconic images, not of Aristotle the man, nor of Stanislavsky the man – but of the *ideas* they presented and consequently came to represent.

Of course, like any good theorist/practitioner they utilised and built on work done by their predecessors and in a sense stood on the shoulders of those who went before (just as those to follow would in turn use *them* and their ideas as stepping stones to the new and the original). Yet somehow, it has been the core works of these two – Aristotle and Stanislavsky – which truly remain in the universal memory and it is their influence that has permeated all the other theories and approaches that have evolved since.

I have always believed that, besides the grand idea(s), and the unquestionably charismatic and enigmatic personae of the key figures in any discipline, the essence of their impact has much to do with a singularly mundane quality they share as theorists, one often lacking in their many contemporaries and successors: the ability to communicate their (complex, provocative) idea(s) to everyone inside (and often even outside) their field of expertise with singular clarity, eloquence and persuasion. Think of the great historians, the great theorists – they could write in such a way that you wanted to read them.

However, pondering on this point a little more in recent times, it occurs to me that this may not *always* be the case – Darwin for one was an abysmally obscure and boring writer, though few could match the sensational nature of his ideas and hence this shortcoming did not stop or prevent the spread of the ideas nor their impact. On the other hand, Darwin did have eloquent and active interpreters, individuals who could understand and communicate the core of his ideas to the rest of academia and the press (who could, of course, be relied upon to do the rest). So perhaps I may amend my statement in the previous paragraph a little to say: “Think of the great historians, the great theorists – they could write in such a way that you wanted to read them, *or they had people working for them who could.*”

And in many respects, so did Stanislavsky. In addition to the enormous persuasiveness of his arguments and his practice, as well as the charm and seduction of his own writing (and reports of his writing and practice by students, colleagues and followers), the Stanislavsky ideas of acting

and directing permeated the world consciousness through the activities and writings of his followers and disciples, as well as those of his rivals and those who sought to reject and/or replace him and his ideas.

That those ideas required interpretation and adaptation is abundantly clear from the wide range of opinion expressed and some particularly interesting differences of interpretation and/or opinion among the writers in this volume.

For example there is a fascinating – and indeed important – tension between Leslie O'Dell and Richard Walsh Bowers' stance on "boundaries" and the inherent dangers – psychological, ethical and ultimately even artistically – of an unquestioning acceptance of the Stanislavsky "system" (and indeed it's most famous – and in some ways most notorious – offspring, the "Method"), and Eugene Lasko's unapologetic belief that creative work is personal and gets messy sometimes. It would appear that the core matter is really not the tools in themselves, but how, when and why people use them, and the kind of people using them. Seeing Lasko "perform" his paper, and reading the subsequent published interview, it is abundantly clear that working with him could be almost a challenging experience, but an enjoyable and creative one. However, put into the hands of a dictatorial director, the Stanislavsky principles and practices – like any dangerous tool – could manifestly be a recipe for disaster, as O'Dell and Bowers indicate so convincingly. And I am sure we all know examples of such cases from our own experience.

O'Dell and Bowers claim (and prove to some extent) that Stanislavsky himself was actually such a dictatorial director at heart and in practice, despite his theories. The fact of the matter of course is that what we are discussing in this book is not a simple set of rules – but the result of a lifetime of work by a man of high intelligence and artistry. But those "rules" *did* come into being over time, were used by many and have become a source of inspiration over the decades, yet, like most theories of art, they are not infallible laws, nor have they ever been. Stanislavsky himself was probably very aware of this, a point made by the ever provocative Charles Marowitz through his two introductory anecdotes about Stanislavsky and Michael Chekhov, which lead him to add that "no matter how brilliant a theoretician, actor and ideologue Stanislavsky might have been, he was also a quaint, idiosyncratic and sometimes uptight 19th century creature". Who could, and did, make mistakes, like all the rest of us mortals.

Somehow the very practice of deconstructing the monolithic view of Stanislavsky as "The Master" in this way, far from diminishing his importance, seems to me to be an exciting and vital enterprise that actually serves to re-confirm and indeed explain something of importance

his ideas and his practice have indubitably had for theatre and performance practice in the twentieth century and beyond – directly and indirectly – and asking ourselves why they would survive despite manifest weaknesses and dangers.

Which brings me to another aspect covered by the conference and this book.

Stanislavsky as catalyst

Much of the focus of the conference was on the Stanislavsky legacy and one found that most speakers addressed this directly or indirectly in some way or other. However, as Marrie Mumford pointed in a conversation during the conference, a remarkable element of this had been the fact that many speakers utilized some *other* prominent practitioner/theorist as a reference point in their discussion of this legacy.

These points of referral include fellow teachers - such disparate figures as Maria Oupenskaya, Richard Boleslavsky, Lee Strassberg, Michael Chekhov, Morris Carnovsky, Robert Benedetti and Ann Bogart - but also more controversial individuals such as Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowsky, Peter Brook, as well as various directors from Africa. It seems that many people have come to their own understanding of Stanislavsky's work through interacting with their own mentors and *in contrast* to other ways of working. In this respect it is clear that more than any other individual, Stanislavsky and his ideas about theatre (including the limitations of those ideas), acted as a catalyst to set off a range of 20th-century experiments in training, theatre-making and performance, which not only created a dynamic theatre culture but in many ways defined the way it was viewed for much of the century and beyond. Nowhere in this book is this better illustrated than in Anne Migliarisi's excellent chronology of Stanislavsky in Canada.

Another example of the colonial impact of this process is provided by the case of the South African actor/director André Huguenet (not detailed in this book). One of the most remarkable theatrical personalities of the 20th-century South African theatre,⁴ the supremely bilingual (Afrikaans/English) actor was a natural performer, besotted with the stage, a meticulous and somewhat dictatorial director, and a voracious reader who virtually dominated South African theatre for almost forty years. A key element in his work was his influence as a director in the Stanislavsky mode and this style was to become the norm for all Afrikaans theatre companies, directors and ultimately the training

institutions founded in Stellenbosch, Bloemfontein, Pretoria, Potchefstroom and other centres in the period 1958-1965.

His interest in Stanislavsky and his particular *interpretation* of the “Stanislavsky system” went on to influence the development of Afrikaans theatre and playwriting in the crucial period between 1952 and 1986. Key elements appear to be his training under Paul de Groot, a Belgian actor/manager who was apparently “of the Meiningen school”, and a crucial meeting that Huguenet had with the aging Stanislavsky and the Russian realist theatre in Moscow in 1937. When combined with the affinity of Afrikaans audiences for social realism and Russian literature, this influence led to some of the most enduring works of the Afrikaans theatre canon, and indeed even the work of some of the more influential English writers, such as Athol Fugard and Paul Slabolepszy.

I would like to think that all of this would have pleased Stanislavsky, for as many have said in the various chapters of this book, at heart he was ultimately always “The Teacher”. The theories derive from that drive, the exercises were developed for it, and the books were the documented versions of that teaching – and live on the way they do because of the responses to them.

Conclusion

Looking back on the points made above, it seems to me the conference had laid excellent grounds for what could be a rather interesting longer-term collaborative project – a study of the impact of the *idea* of Stanislavsky and the Stanislavskian approach to theatre in countries and regions across the globe. And this innovative book may just be a valuable first foray into that field.

Notes

1 While there are two English spellings for his name, Stanislavsky and Stanislavski, the more commonly used in my experience has been “Stanislavsky”, the form also chosen by the conference organisers. Similarly there are a number of variations on the first name – Constantin, Konstantin and even (strangely) Constantine at times (I suspect the latter is a creation of the Windows spell-checker). My Afrikaans background often urges me towards “Konstantin” as the more “Russian looking”, but for the sake of consistency I’ll stick with “Constantin” as preferred by the editors.

2 This would not necessarily be true, of course, if you were not European, or not working in a context which derives from the European or Aristotelian tradition – but then you may have other deities – such as the Japanese theorist/practitioner Zeami. But even in the East, in Africa and in South America one finds traces of the Aristotelian and Stanislavskian presence. Vide Augusto Boal’s writings on Aristotle.

3 See, for example, the chapters in this book by Annelis Kuhlmann and K. Jane Gibson on the origins and publication of the writings.

4 A measure of his immense reputation and his uniquely eccentric personality is the fact that **four** plays have been written about (or featured) him recently: *André Huguenet – Meneer!* (“André Huguenet – Sir!”) by Jill Fletcher, *Mirakel* (“Miracle”) by Reza de Wet, *Elke duim ’n koning* (“Every Inch a King”) by Pieter Fourie, and *Exits and Entrances* by Athol Fugard. All of them have been performed successfully, with Fugard’s play being staged in various parts of the world, including the West End and Broadway (2005-2008).